

Experiencing caste in higher education: Everyday pedagogic contexts and silenced conflicts*

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Fare esperienza di casta nell'istruzione superiore. Contesti educativi quotidiani e conflitti silenziati

This study engages with the experiences of Dalit-Bahujan (oppressed social castes) students at a higher education institution in India. Drawing from interview-based data, it explores the students' narratives to map their educational experiences, taking the medium of instruction as a case in point. The study aims to deepen understanding of the intersection of caste and curricular-pedagogic context of higher education and its relation to knowledge production in institutional contexts. The findings highlight a significant gap between the socio-economic backgrounds of Dalit-Bahujan students and the institutional and pedagogical structures, processes, and discourses they encounter. Based on these findings, the study further examines the framing of marginality at the intersection of caste, language and background of Dalit-Bahujan students. The lack of institutional support often relegates Dalit-Bahujan students to the margins within higher education institutions, not only excluding the disadvantaged social groups but also impinging upon the democratisation of knowledge production. We conclude that the question of medium of knowledge production necessitates a critical examination of which lives and voices are included in curricular and pedagogic processes.

Questo articolo tratta dell'esperienza degli studenti Dalit-Bahujan (caste sociali oppresse) in un istituto di istruzione superiore in India. Esso si avvale di uno studio basato su interviste per esplorare le narrazioni degli studenti Dalit-Bahujan e per mappare la loro esperienza educativa prendendo come esempio la lingua di insegnamento. Questa esplorazione mira a contribuire a una comprensione più profonda del nesso tra caste e contesto curricolare-pedagogico dell'istruzione superiore e della sua relazione con la produzione di conoscenza nei contesti istituzionali. I risultati evidenziano il notevole divario tra il background socioeconomico degli studenti Dalit-Bahujan, le strutture istituzionali e pedagogiche, i processi e i discorsi. Sulla base di questi risultati, l'articolo affronta il problema della marginalità nel punto di intersezione tra casta, lingua e background degli studenti Dalit-Bahujan. La mancanza di supporto istituzionale spesso spinge gli studenti Dalit-Bahujan a diventare non-persone negli istituti di istruzione superiore, il che non solo esclude le comunità svantaggiate, ma incide anche sulla democratizzazione del processo di produzione della conoscenza. In conclusione, la questione del mezzo di produzione della conoscenza richiede di riflettere su quali vite e quali voci debbano essere incluse nei processi curricolari e pedagogici.

Keywords: Higher education; Dalit-Bahujan; Caste; Language; Marginalization.

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1. Introduction

“For some people, life itself is a curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past” (Vemula, 2016). These lines are from the suicide note of Rohith Vemula, a research scholar from an oppressed caste at a public university who ended his life in 2016. There have been other cases of suicide of Dalit students in higher education institutions (HEIs) that scholars and activists understand as a reflection of how caste is embedded in the banal everyday structures and flows of higher education (HE) (Singh, 2013; Thorat, 2016). *Dalit-Bahujan*¹ (oppressed social castes) autobiographical accounts of experiences of exclusion in educational institutions, especially in schools, strengthen this understanding (Valmiki, 2003). These experiences that are generally perceived as casualties of personal situations, reflect the contemporary prevalent forms of everyday caste conflicts often fragmented, hidden and silenced in institutional sites (Rathod, 2021; Sukumar, 2023). This banality of these conflicts shapes the lack of systematic policy engagement with and absence of institutional mechanisms to address underlying issues. For instance, in the Indian policy context, the question of caste is primarily understood and addressed in the lexicon of access.

Enhancing Dalit-Bahujan students' access to HE is a prominent policy concern in India. India's National Education Policies (NEPs) have included varied recommendations for enhancing access to HE. For instance, NEP 2020 (MoE, 2020) states:

Entry into quality higher education can open a vast array of possibilities that can lift both individuals as well as communities out of the cycles of disadvantage. For this reason, making quality higher education opportunities available to all individuals must be among the highest priorities. This Policy envisions ensuring equitable access to quality education to all students, with a special emphasis on Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (p. 41).

Such policy recommendations combined with the reservations or affirmative action have facilitated the entry-level inclusion of Dalit-Bahujan students in HE. However, despite an overall increase in enrolment of Dalit-Bahujan students, their representation in HE has remained comparatively low (MoE, 2022). The numbers further decrease as one moves to postgraduate and doctoral levels. Caste continues to reflect in the streaming of Dalit-Bahujan students in certain kinds of avenues (Subramanian, 2019; Rao, 2013). All India Survey on Higher Education (MoE, 2022) indicates that the number of students from unreserved category is concentrated in STEM, while Dalit-Bahujan students are concentrated in the social sciences and humanities. However, even in these areas, the percentage enrolment of Dalit-Bahujan is lower compared to students in the unreserved category. When conflated with the relatively lower transition rates of Dalit-Bahujan from school to HE, the endemic issues embedded in educational processes come to the fore.

Analysing this phenomenon, Sabharwal and Malish (2017) state: “Inequalities in educational opportunity are manifested by under-representation of the socio-economically disadvantaged and first-generation learners in elite institutions, and in the science and engineering streams, and a progressive loss of representation as one moves up the academic ladder” (p. 1). When conflated with the relatively lower transition from school education to HE for students from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, these indices point to endemic issues embedded in the institutional processes. A study by Azam and Bloom (2009) estimated the prevalence of low transition rates from secondary to HE among Dalit-Bahujan students in India, especially in the case of rural women.

This highlights the long-standing issue of the lack of systematic policy response to caste-based inequities experienced in HE (Sabharwal & Malish, 2018; Tilak, 2015). Efforts towards increasing access

1. Caste is a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in India, dividing society into heredity-based endogamous groups. Those at the lower rungs of this system, particularly the Dalit-Bahujan communities, have historically faced socio-economic and educational marginalisation. The term “Dalit-Bahujan” refers to a collective of oppressed caste groups, including the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Ilaiah, 1996, p. 166). These groups have been systematically excluded from access to power, resources, and opportunities, remaining on the peripheries of India's social, political, and economic systems. In both academic and political discourse, “Dalit-Bahujan” highlights a shared identity rooted in common experiences of caste-based oppression, while also recognising the distinct histories and struggles of each group.

of socio-economically disadvantaged students in HE have been made but the retention and degree attainment rates of Dalit-Bahujan remain low (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). While relatively under-studied, the students' experiences after entry in HE are increasingly being recognised as significant in their success and transition. These experiences especially include their pedagogic and social interactions in the institutional contexts (Dey, 2022).

This paper comprises a part of a broader research agenda to understand the operation of caste in the structures, processes and discourses in HE by engaging with the everyday experiences of Dalit-Bahujan students. This broader research agenda spans the co-authors' interest in making sense of how caste operates in urban educational contexts. In Indian policy and everyday discourses, there is a common-sense belief that caste becomes obliterated in an urban context, especially in HE (Sharma, 2021). However, a nascent but growing body of literature (discussed in next section) dispels this belief. Drawing from this agenda the present research is focused on the pedagogic experiences of Dalit-Bahujan students in a HEI in India. It is based on qualitative in-depth interviews of Dalit-Bahujan students. While pedagogic experiences have multiple facets, this paper takes only one aspect, the language policy at the institutional level, as a case in point. The paper is organised into five sections, including the introduction. The second section engages with the different facets of experiences of Dalit-Bahujan in HE as discussed in the literature. The third section discusses the methodology. The fourth presents the findings. The last section concludes the discussions.

2. Prisms of caste in HE: Caste-based exclusion, pedagogies and language

This paper bases its understanding of caste on Kabeer's (2000) work that has argued that certain groups in society are set apart and locked out in realising their potential through the process of cultural devaluation. This devaluation produces disadvantages in different forms through "active dynamics of social interaction" (p. 84). It is through the process of cultural devaluation, certain groups in society are ridiculed, denied rights, declined, invisibilised and devalued, thus leading to their social exclusion. Social exclusion is a group phenomenon which distinguishes "those who belong to groups which enjoy access to resources and respect and those who do not" (Kabeer, 2000, p. 89). This social ordering and rules of distribution of power set in motion a cycle of marginalisation that remains "the most dangerous form of oppression" where a group is debarred from "useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination" (Young, 1990, p. 53). Guru (2000) explains this in terms of the political relation between the core and margins and notes, "On moral grounds, the relationship between the margin and the core is always of a hierarchical nature. It is dichotomous, in which the core exists only at the cost of the margin. In other words, the existence of a margin becomes the logical requirement of the core" (p. 115).

While caste-based discrimination and conflicts are well studied, the everyday routines in which caste operates in society have gained attention in the literature recently, particularly in HE. This paper draws on this literature while understanding that caste conflicts are prevalent across institutional sites, but their forms are not always overt. These conflicts are often fragmented, undefined/unarticulated and silenced. Freire's (2000) and Delpit's (1988) works have conceptualised how the "culture of silence" and "silenced dialogues", respectively, omnipresent in education are instrumental in oppression of the marginalised groups and create a passive and suppressed self-view among the students from oppressed groups, while suppressing conflict and resistance. To understand 'silenced conflict', we draw from research in organisation studies that demonstrates how institutions and groups develop a culture of silencing and not acknowledging conflicts (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Roth and Kleiner (1999) have argued that many organisations have an unsaid cultural practice - "don't tell someone you have a problem unless you have the solution" (p. 16). These works also indicate that "those who fail to reveal their thoughts and feelings often experience stress, dissatisfaction, cynicism, and even depression... Those who do not speak up often come to perceive that their perspectives do not matter [...]" (Perlow & Repenning, 2009, p. 196). These situations develop institutional pathologies leading to failure to cope and eventually being pushed-out. Thus, it becomes significant to explore how caste is experienced, articulated and silenced in HE.

Given the vast literature, the focus in this section has been restricted only on the pedagogic and social experience of Dalit-Bahujan students in HE. The impact of caste-based exclusion on psycho-social well-being and academic lives of the students is well documented even in HE (Komanapalli & Rao, 2020; Varghese *et al.*, 2019; Sukumar, 2023). The literature agrees that marginality on account of caste, class, and gender, along with lack of facilitative pedagogical structures in HE often push-out such students (Maurya, 2018; Thorat, 2016). Further, the absence of facilitative pedagogical structures in HE not only becomes a crisis for the socio-economically disadvantaged students, but also has a bearing on democratisation of knowledge production.

In his autoethnography, Sukumar (2008) examines the ways in which Dalit students are subjected to ridicule based on their caste names and complexion. He notes that Dalit students are often faced with derogatory terms such as 'pigs', 'government's son-in-law', 'bastards', 'son of god', and 'beggars' in universities (p. 17). The experiences of ridicule become even more disturbing when caste-based discrimination and gendered violence are perpetuated on the campuses of higher learning. While recounting specific examples of the daily discrimination that Dalit girls face, Kumar (2016) shares: "In Delhi colleges, Dalit girls with deep anxiety have spoken about how they are ridiculed by the question 'Quote se aye ho ya kothe se' (Have you come via reservation quota or brothel?)" (p. 13). The negative attitudes of upper caste students, teachers, and administrators reflect deep-rooted caste prejudices that can drive students toward self-harm (Rathod, 2021; Singh, 2013). The experiences of caste discrimination amplify as Dalit students move-up the academic ladder (Maurya, 2018). They are given less marks, labelled 'quota students', have restricted peer and faculty networks, and are denied good academic guides (Sukumar, 2023). The abysmal representation of Dalit faculty and exclusion of Dalit icons in books also reflects the caste prejudices in curriculum and in institutes of HE at large (Lum, 2019).

Literature also notes that while Dalit-Bahujan students see reservation as an inclusionary mechanism to facilitate access, the perceptions of non-Dalit students and teachers about reservations continue to shape their HE experiences (Ovichegan, 2014). Dalit-Bahujan students continue to be marked by sub-caste affiliations, economic conditions, gender and rural-urban location. This is seen when Dalits from 'privileged' backgrounds also exclude those students whose status is considered relatively lower in intersecting caste-class hierarchies. This is seen as an attempt of the privileged Dalit students to disassociate with the larger Dalit student community and associate with non-Dalit students:

Creamy layer dalits, having a distinct edge over other members of their community, are more inclined to associate with equivalently placed persons from other – non-dalit – caste ... As a result, whether consciously or subconsciously, the creamy layer dalit continues to form privileged groups in which they are comfortable (Ovichegan, 2014, p. 370).

In this context, the literature also engages with how campus culture compounds tensions between caste and class (Pathania & Tierney, 2018). While there is a good match between the cultural capital of the elites and the structures of HE, the students from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts are found to have inferior cultural and social capital and hence they struggle to navigate the institutional culture. HE remains "an elitist and exclusive field" (Pathania & Tierney, 2018, p. 224) as HEIs are hardly prepared to address structural issues within and outside the classroom spaces and thus remain silent on or silence on students' experiences (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2019).

Language or medium of instruction is also noted as a significant aspect of Dalit-Bahujan experiences where the axes of caste and class become indistinguishably intertwined. Some scholars see English education as an empowering instrument for Dalit-Bahujan (Ilame, 2020; Omvedt, 2006; Shepherd, 2022). Studies point to high student aspiration for English education (Advani, 2009; Mathew, 2022). Kumar (1996) argues that the ability to comprehend English in a global village is seen as "marker of a young person's eligibility for negotiating the opportunity structure" in the knowledge economy (p. 59). At the same time, those who lack English proficiency have "limited scope for moving into higher income groups and higher status roles" (p. 59). While seen to achieve equity and social justice, the denial of access to quality English education at the school level compounds the exclusion of Dalit-Bahujan students when they reach English medium HEIs. It pushes them in the situation of crisis, self-doubt and dependence on others to survive. The lack of institutional support often pushes them to become non-being in the institutes of HE which not only excludes the disadvantaged communities but also impinges upon

democratisation of knowledge and process of knowledge production, and violates their linguistic spaces (Karthikeyan, 2017; Kumar, 2021; Nag, 2023).

In HEIs, both Dalit students and Dalit faculty are “ghettoised through mutual bracketing” wherein Dalit students are assigned to Dalit guides which on the one hand deprives Dalits students of the opportunities to benefit from the larger community of teachers and on the other, this bracketing restricts upper caste students to learn from the expertise of Dalit teachers (Guru, 2000, p. 112). This bracketing becomes even more complex when it intersects with the question of language. Scholars and activists like Guru (2000), Nag (2019) and others have argued that faculty members in research programmes at many HEIs opt to supervise students from privileged backgrounds who have already acquired a proficiency in English. Sukumar (2023) notes, “As tokenism, one or two students from Dalit, tribal or a religious minority are chosen to supervise by many faculties, albeit hailing from an urban, English medium background” (p. 98). This sorting and selection legitimises the cultural capital of the dominant group and marginalises the knowledge and groups, identities and experiences of those who are subordinate.

The command over English is a prominent criterion to define merit (Sukumar, 2023). However, the notion of merit comes into scrutiny when a Dalit-Bahujan student acquires English proficiency. In such a situation, a Dalit-Bahujan student would either be considered an exception or would be doubted and their struggle would be completely disregarded. The ideology of merit continues to hold a powerful position in making Dalit students internalise that they are undeserving candidates (Lum, 2019). Therefore, the medium of instruction is one of the “potential minefields” that pushes marginalised groups to dropout from HEIs (Sukumar, 2023, p. 20). However, the engagement with the intersection of caste and class in the context of medium of instruction in HE is at its nascent stages. In this context, this paper focuses on exploring this dimension.

3. Methodology

This study has been conceptualised within the conventions of qualitative research. Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry where the purpose is to understand and gain meaning out of human experiences. It tends to involve researchers in collecting data through looking at documents, observing or interviewing participants in their natural setting where the issue is being experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2007). Hammersley (2013) points out that qualitative research is “aimed at discovering how human beings understand, experience, interpret, and produce the social world” (as cited in Sandelowski, 2004, p. 893). This research aims to explore the narratives of Dalit-Bahujan students to map their educational experiences while taking the medium of instruction as a case in point. It involved examining the narratives of these students to understand their experiences of inclusion and exclusion within a public university setting.

3.1. Research site

The data for this study was collected at a public university in a metropolitan urban context in India. This is because public universities in India typically have a higher enrolment of Dalit-Bahujan students. Like many other HEIs, the university prioritised English as the medium of instruction. The HEI was a relatively small size institution with approximately six thousand students offering undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes in multiple disciplinary areas. Collecting data from a single institution was decided as it offered the possibility to engage with a diverse set of experiences in a single context. To maintain anonymity the geographic details and the name of the university are concealed.

3.2. Participants

The data for this study has been collected through interviews with ten students whose details are provided in Table 1 (four undergraduate, four masters/postgraduate and two research, including six male and four female students), and three faculty members (including two males and one female).

Table I: Distribution of participants

Category	Female	Male
Students enrolled in undergraduate programmes	0	4
Students enrolled in postgraduate/master's programmes	2	2
Students enrolled in research studies programmes	2	0
Faculty members	1	2

The participants comprised those who have been a part of an informal Dalit-Bahujan students' group in the university and volunteered to participate in the study. They were from different semesters of social sciences and humanities programmes, except for two undergraduate students who were enrolled in a professional programme. This enabled understanding the experience of undergraduate students who received some language support and the students from masters and research programmes who did not find any language support at their current level of study. This was especially important as the complexity of reading resources and writing expectations increases as the students advance in HE involving independent projects and dissertations. Eight were educated in vernacular medium schools and two in low-fee-charging private schools. All were from families with annual family income either below one lakh rupees or between one to two lakh rupees. The three teachers were involved in both teaching undergraduate and master's programmes and had at least ten years of experience. Brief profiles of the student participants are presented in Table 2 and the faculty member profiles are presented in Table 3. Instead of using the original names, a code has been assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity.

Table 2: Participant profiles: Students

Student Participants (SP) Code	Male/ Female	Programme and year	Education prior to enrolling in the HEI	Medium of instruction at school stage	Home language/ Mother tongue	Family income (One lakh Indian Rupees = approximately 1078 Euros; two lakh Indian Rupees = approximately 2155 Euros)
SPo1	Male	BA History. Year III	Primary: Private school. Secondary and Higher secondary: Public school	English (up to primary); Hindi (up to senior secondary)	Hindi	Less than one lakh Indian Rupees
SPo2	Male	UG Professional Degree. Year III	School: NGO-run	Hindi	Bhojpuri	Between one to two lakh Indian Rupees
SPo3	Male	UG Professional Degree. Year III	School: Public school.	Hindi	Hindi	Between one to two lakh Indian Rupees
SPo4	Male	BA Social Sciences. Year III	School: Public school.	Hindi	Hindi	Less than one lakh Indian Rupees
SPo5	Female	MA Education. Year II	School: Public school. Previous HE: Hindi medium public university	Hindi	Rongpa	Between one to two lakh Indian Rupees
SPo6	Male	MA Sociology. Year I	School: Public school. Previous HE: English medium public university	Marathi (up to secondary); Hindi (senior secondary)	Marathi	Less than one lakh Indian Rupees
SPo7	Male	MA Social Sciences. Year II	School: Public school. Previous HE: English medium public university	Hindi	Hindi	Less than one lakh Indian Rupees
SPo8	Female	MA History. Year I	School: Public school. Previous HE: English medium public university	Hindi	Hindi	Less than one lakh Indian Rupees

Student Participants (SP) Code	Male/ Female	Programme and year	Education prior to enrolling in the HEI	Medium of instruction at school stage	Home language/ Mother tongue	Family income (One lakh Indian Rupees = approximately 1078 Euros; two lakh Indian Rupees = approximately 2155 Euros)
SP09	Female	MPhil Gender Studies. Year I	School: Public school. Previous HE: English medium public university	Hindi	Hindi	Between one to two lakh Indian Rupees
SP10	Female	PhD Women Studies. Year I	School: English medium private school. Previous HE: English medium public university	English	Hindi	Between one to two lakh Indian Rupees

Table 3: Participant profiles: Faculty members

Faculty Participant (FP) Code	Male / Female	Position	Department	Years of Experience in a HEI	Levels Taught
FPo1	Female	Assistant Professor	Department of English	10	Undergraduate
FPo2	Male	Associate Professor	Department of Education	10	Undergraduate, postgraduate and research
FPo3	Male	Associate Professor	Department of Professional Studies	11	Undergraduate and postgraduate

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The data has been collected through open-ended prolonged face-to-face interviews following the conventions of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Hammersely, 2013). The interview protocol was developed for this purpose, which included a structured component for gathering demographic data and indicative questions that served as themes for open-ended discussions. Since different programme levels and constituents were involved, efforts were made to ensure that the data collected is interconnected and relevant across different aspects of the study. The interviews both with the students and faculty participants focused on the following key aspects: a) the experiences of navigating HE (including experiences of inclusion and exclusion) in relation to the medium of instruction; b) faculty reflections on the rationale for prioritising English as the medium of instruction, and its implications for equity and social justice; and c) institutional mechanism and curricular-pedagogic support available to address students' language needs.

The authors approached individual students seeking their voluntary participation and informed consent for this study. The participants who were willing to provide the data for this study were selected for the study. The permission for recording the interviews were sought beforehand at the time of informed consent. The interviews were conducted by the first author. These began with an introduction by the author about the study, followed by collecting structured demographic data. This provided the initial conversational context for the interview. The open-ended thematic questions were introduced by the author sequentially and were modified and adapted based on the responses of the participants.

Exploring questions focused on the experiences of social caste and marginalisation often presents significant ethical challenges. However, the first author's background as a first-generation university goer and a member of a marginalised caste group enabled to approach the conversations with care and empathy for the research participants, especially the students. The positionality of the author played a crucial role in forming rapport and trust with the participants.

The interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly by the authors to familiarise themselves with the data. This was followed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-stage approach that included developing familiarisation with the data by repeated reading, formulating initial codes manually, collating and sorting the codes in the focal themes, review of the themes, re-defining and re-naming themes, and report formation. On the one hand the analysis was guided by the analytic interest in the following a-priori concerns guided by the research questions: framing of English medium instruction, compounding of socio-economic disadvantage in HE, experiencing alienation, and institutional mechanism to address language needs. On the other hand, the analysis approach was predominantly inductive in nature as the participants' meanings were prioritised.

4. Students' pedagogic experiences

4.1. Framing English medium instruction: Between social justice and global economy

Based on the interviews with the faculty members, the rationale for prioritising English as a medium of instruction was explored. The dominant argument was that "good" resources and literature in most

domains of HE were available in English. Even in the instances where some works are available in Hindi or other vernaculars, they are translations from English, and generally “not of good quality”. However, the university teachers attempted to support students in making transition from their school language (in most cases, Hindi) to English. A faculty member stated:

Some of us have gone to other institutions and have personally tried to issue various books which are available in Hindi and tried to locate some of the Hindi journals (FP02).

There were no formal institutional mechanisms in place to support this process. The faculty member explained that he agreed with the understanding that English medium instruction is essential for all as

those who have been denied English education at the school level will not be denied quality English education at the higher education level (FP03),

especially in view of the popular aspiration for the language in India. Thus, teaching in English was seen as a means for inclusion and equity. A faculty member noted:

Equity can be achieved when the institution acknowledges that students need English medium instruction as a means for social mobility... denying a quality English medium instruction at the higher education level would be deprivation at two levels [...] (FP01).

Connected with this was the reason that English was seen as a global language that will help students to enter both the job market and for further higher studies (Graddol, 2000). This comes across from the following narrative of a faculty member:

We call ourselves a global village today and English has now become a global language for communication and if we will not give them English then we are also denying them something from where they can compete at the global level... When we look at the employability, ‘21st century skills’ which also involves the ability to communicate in English [...] (FP03).

The participants’ narratives also allude to how the rationality and pressures of the global knowledge economy have seeped into pedagogic choices and institutional common-sense. On the one hand this has seemingly opened possibilities for marginalised students. On the other hand, it has legitimised new forms of social ordering (for instance by privileging a dominant language that retains its colonial vestiges) and widened the gap between institutional knowledge and the students’ socio-cultural contexts (Kumar, 1996).

4.2. Compounding disadvantage: Prior schooling, future aspirations and silence

The students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often study in government schools. It has become a ‘common knowledge’ that given the abysmal quality and systematic degradation, the government schools have a high concentration of Dalit-Bahujan students (Sharma, 2021). All the student participants in this study were first generation university goers, with parents barely having completed higher secondary education. The home languages of students were Hindi, Bhojpuri, Rongpa and Marathi. English for them was used “only for academic engagement”. However, each of the student participants had an aspiration to learn the language.

We are left behind in the race of academic competition, we are left behind in the race of scholarship, and in the race of grades and class participation and so on. I always write my assessments in English because we are burdened with so many tags - ‘you are weak’ and ‘you do not have the capability’. To get unburdened, I write in English even though I get low grades. This is also the reason that *we* do not get merit scholarships (SP01).

One student participant who studied from a private school narrated how a binary operates within private schools among English medium and Hindi medium.

I did my schooling from an English medium private school but there are categories of English medium schools that teach in English, and those that teach in Hindi... If I had studied from a good English medium school, I would not have got the cultural shock of seeing everyone speaking in English [...] (SP10).

These inequalities of access to educational opportunity also get reflected inside the classroom spaces where students from vernacular medium backgrounds are looked down upon and develop a sense of not belonging to the group. Students who come from such backgrounds are often silenced either because they hesitate or as they are not left with any options. It is those who come from privileged backgrounds whose voices are heard.

I know the answer to almost every question and can give answers beyond the expectations of the faculty, but I find it challenging to put my arguments in English. Even when I try to speak in English the whole class starts looking at me as if I have done something wrong. I see a clear distinction between myself and English medium students who do not care and interact much (SP08).

First, we feel hesitant to get up and put our thoughts in front of class. But it is not related to just putting your thoughts forward but putting it in English and getting acceptance in class also matters. It also has a relation with one's own economic condition because the fee for private schools is so high that children coming from marginalised groups cannot afford it (SP06).

I never studied from an English medium school, now after coming to the university, I realised how important English is. I find myself feeling behind in my studies. Sometimes students feel hesitant and afraid to ask faculty whether they can write their assessments in Hindi rather than English; it is like I will do it in English but will not ask my faculty for Hindi [...] (SP02).

Another issue which is often faced by students lies with the difficulty in comprehending reading material and access to reading material because to read, either one needs printout of the material or laptop/smartphone to access material both of which have cost.

The length of readings also increases with time. Sometimes it is 20 pages, sometimes it is 90 pages or even more and you cannot get the printout of it because the printout costs a lot that one cannot afford... I do not have internet connectivity and a system at home. I had to come to the university to access the computer for the reading material even on Sundays... even if you understand the theory well you cannot understand whether you have actually understood it or not or how you would share it in class (SP10).

Another student expressed her difficulty in comprehending the translation of the English texts in Hindi:

I find myself having to translate every reading material into Hindi. But there are instances when the Google translations of child development theories into Hindi are so challenging to understand that I am left confused in both the languages (SP05).

Thus, students saw the medium of instruction as a question of access to learning. The feeling of “cultural alienation” was central to the experiences of Dalit-Bahujan students (Tschurennev, 2018). English is clearly a barrier for them to participate in the university, however, the aspiration to learn English is something that pushed them to continue in the English-medium university and prove themselves. The participants' use of *we* to explain these experiences needs further investigation but it indicates how they were articulating their individual experiences as connected.

4.3. Experiencing alienation and devising strategies

On the one hand, the participants expressed their aspiration to develop English proficiency. On the other hand, developing this proficiency was an alienating experience with little or no pedagogic support. This struggle became visible in the classroom spaces. The institutional structure prioritised participation in English which led to silencing and fringing of the participants in the classroom. The control over pedagogic flows (including speech, class organisation, text selection, and assessment design) in the classroom invariably lies with faculty members. A student shared:

Though some students give answers in Hindi also and teachers listen to them but respond in English only. (SP02).

This is the central principle for maintaining the culture of silence (Freire, 2000).

During my orientation, everybody was introducing themselves in English, including the teachers... I was so afraid to speak two lines... On the very first day I felt like running away... In class we discuss certain cultural aspects around cinema, art, jokes, and you will be completely alienated if you have not watched particular kinds of things being talked about because you are not coming from that background (SP10).

These articulations reflect that language becomes a potent tool to “restrict the entry of dalits into academic circles” that are characterised by specific linguistic structures including syntax of a particular kind (Guru, 2012, p. 19). Another student who was struggling to speak in English, shared that

[...] as if I have come to completely different world where everybody is speaking in English. I feel disrespect when I do not speak in English because everybody around you is speaking in English and you are not (SP07).

This sentiment echoes the performative pressure and discomfort experienced by individuals in HE, where English proficiency is highly valued and prevalent. The student’s sense of being in a ‘different world’ highlights the disconnect between his socio-cultural background and educational context that does not fully accommodate diverse linguistic experiences:

I somehow completed my first semester at the margin level by scoring a C plus grade... wrote my assessments in English but the instructor never understood whatever I was trying to write in the assessments (SP08).

The student participants acknowledged that faculty members provided them support in terms of verbally translating concepts and providing alternate material in cases where they were aware of such material. The students felt that the limited language support the faculty members or other peers extended was delivered as “an act of favor”. This paradox made some students think of dropping out from the university. However, they were aware of an absence of alternative spaces that are free of such alienating experiences. Finding this support inadequate, some students also developed their own strategies for learning English. For instance, one participant said:

I did not understand English at that time, so I started making efforts to read material in English, started writing in English, and started watching various YouTube videos in English (SP08).

Another stated:

At that point of time I started to do extra study, for instance, I used to watch online videos to understand sentence structure, and vocabulary. I struggled a lot in the initial semesters but the idea of ‘doing extra’ supported me (SP01).

Each participant expressed a complex experience of alienation, marginalisation, aspiring and strategising in the university. However, despite struggling with English and the social *ethos*, they never chose the ‘easier’ path of writing assessments in Hindi or another vernacular. Most found it difficult to muster the confidence to speak up to the teacher.

4.4. Institutional mechanisms for language support

To facilitate students' transition to English medium instruction, the university started some of the bridge courses such as the English Language Proficiency Course (ELPC). These were included in the curriculum of the undergraduate programmes aimed at addressing the language needs of the students. The duration of such courses ranged from one to two semesters in the first year of the undergraduate programmes. Although many students at the undergraduate level appreciated the ELPC, some students feel that the duration of these courses (thus limiting their scope) is not enough to make a transition towards English.

I survived in the first year of BA because of the help I got in the first two semesters from these courses and the help I got from language centre, however, as I came to third and fourth semester the number of assignments, number of readings started to increase and because there were no language support from university after the first two semesters I could not survive and I got semester back in the second year (SP04).

Highlighting the duration of language courses, another student:

Given that one semester barely extends for three months, how can one assume that we will learn English in these three months? (SP03).

Most of the masters and research level students expressed that the medium of instruction becomes a challenging issue as one moves to masters and research level programmes because there is no English language support provided at these levels. A research student who appeared to struggle in writing thesis in English expressed:

There are students who face language issues. We have to write a thesis in English, but nobody tells us how to write it in academic English. Though we have done a research methodology course, there is no provision for a course which takes care of our academic reading and writing problems (SP09).

In contrast, another research student expressed an important concern highlighting the need to democratise HE. She shared:

Nothing is going to happen from English-Hindi and thus repeatedly bringing models will do nothing unless more languages come, and by more languages I do not only mean Hindi. In order to get more languages, one needs to break the dichotomous relationship between English and Hindi. There is a need to organise events, talks and discussions in different languages. Even within India, we have English as a medium of instruction in most of the universities, but we do not have any regional language. So, I see it as completely unconstitutional and undemocratic (SP10).

The articulations of the students on the one hand revealed a need to provide and strengthen the curricular support at all levels and on the other, these articulations point out a need to create academic spaces where different languages are used.

5. Discussion

Educational institutions which are aimed at countering and compensating structural deprivations, perpetuate a sense of inadequacy among the marginalised students. The perpetual sense of inadequacy creates self-doubt, and is detrimental to students' well-being, readiness to seek and use opportunities. The students from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts grow up in conditions of deprivation and often internalise their subservient and inferior position in the society. The conditions of deprivation and marginalisation not only reflect how certain stratifications, hierarchies, histories of relations and identities of people are formed but how power and control is embedded in larger social structures of the society.

While the upper caste and class students “fit into requirement easily” in the institutes of HE (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2019, p. 356), Dalit-Bahujan students are in a constant “fear of being treated as an inferior category among the educated” (Jayaram, 1993, p. 103). Students from disadvantaged contexts experience various forms of violence or conflicts in education that may not take overt identifiable forms. These conflicts are refracted through policies, pedagogy and knowledge – and may be understood as epistemic violence or conflict.

HEIs are considered as spaces where knowledge is produced and shared. However, this production and sharing is often in a particular language which only students from privileged backgrounds can meaningfully participate in. Thus, the question of medium of knowledge production requires thinking on whose lives and voices are to be included in the curricular and pedagogic processes. The voices from the margins will not be able to occupy centrality in HE unless these become a part of academic writing. The findings from our interview-based study point that a considerable gap between the socio-economic backgrounds of the students and institutional knowledge and pedagogical structures are rarely systematically thought about in HEIs. This study indicates that the proficiency in English acts as an axis of exclusion that operates by silencing articulation of conflict by creating self-doubt.

Students bring a rich repertoire of knowledge in their own language(s) to classrooms. English as a sole medium of instruction closes the avenue for students to access, produce and share knowledge other than in English. The decision in which language knowledge must be produced lies with the universities rather than the students which on the one hand empowers students who had done their schooling from elite English medium private schools, and on the other constantly constructs lack of English proficiency as a disability for the others. While the massification of HE in India has facilitated the entry of a diverse student population, the institutions remain ill-prepared to include diverse student populations and struggle to offer them institutional support (Sabharwal & Malish, 2018; Varghese *et al.*, 2019). As large numbers of students are entering HE in India, HEIs will have to adopt a multi-faceted approach in meaningfully engaging a diverse student population.

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